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English Title: *The Illusionist*

Original Title: *L'illusionniste*

Country of Origin: UK, France

Year: 2010

Language: English, French, Gaelic

Production Companies: Pathé, Django Films, Ciné B, France 3 Cinéma

Filming Location: Edinburgh

Director: Sylvain Chomet

Producers: Sally Chomet, Bob Last

Screenwriters: Sylvain Chomet, Jacques Tati

Art Director: Bjarne Hansen

Editor: Sylvain Chomet

Runtime: 80 minutes

Synopsis: Attempting to eke out a living with dogged, dignified determination at the tail-end of the 1950s, Tatischeff is an aging music hall magician confronted by the inexorable decline of audience interest in the trade that he plies, due to the rise of rock and roll and other competing popular cultural distractions. An increasingly difficult search for work forces the old man northwards, away from his native Paris to London and then the Western Isles of Scotland. In the latter place he meets Alice, a naïve young local girl who is enraptured by Tatischeff's personal kindness and what she takes to be his genuine magical powers. For those reasons, she follows Tatischeff to Edinburgh, where the magician takes up a theatrical engagement and uses his wages to support Alice, indulging her increasingly extravagant – if innocent – demands for couture clothing and other luxuries. All-too-aware that this surrogate parent-child is both practically and psychologically unsustainable, Tatischeff eventually departs from Edinburgh without telling Alice, leaving her some money, a bouquet of flowers, and a note saying that 'Magicians do not exist'.

Critique: According to conventional critical wisdom, French animator Sylvain Chomet's *The Illusionist* is a cinematic paean to Edinburgh, the city within which the film is largely set and from which it was largely made. But while Chomet's work may indeed constitute 'the most beautiful love letter ever written to [that] city on screen' (Gibbons, 2010), *The Illusionist* does not celebrate classic cinematic stereotypes of Scotland as a ravishingly romantic pre- or semi-modern idyll— or at least, not as a self-sufficient end in and of themselves. Rather, Chomet's movie uses certain familiar images of

Scotland and Scottishness as a vehicle through which to develop a melancholic allegorical reading of cultural change within late-twentieth-century Western societies. *The Illusionist* argues that a range of quintessentially modern phenomena, such as post-Elvis pop music, television, and mass consumerism, have deadened the imaginative and emotional sensibilities of contemporary audiences by destroying the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century traditions of popular entertainment that so enriched the lives and minds of earlier generations.

As part of that thematic project, *The Illusionist* freely acknowledges a glaring irony, namely, that the film itself is part of the very problem that Chomet goes to such extravagant, amusing, and moving lengths to bemoan. Based on an un-filmed script by the great French director Jacques Tati, *The Illusionist* is, after all, a wistful cinematic account of the death of its central character's trade and secrets at the hands of cinema and a range of other related popular cultural traditions that first emerged at various points during the first half of the twentieth century. This much is clear already from the self-referential gag with which the movie introduces its viewers to Tatischeff and his act: the magician is unexpectedly forced to fill time on a Parisian theatre stage when the projection equipment due to start screening a film – called, incidentally, *The Illusionist* – malfunctions at the last minute, leaving the paying audience with nothing to see. In arch moments such as these, Chomet traces the dying of the light in one sense – the sad, slow demise of Tatischeff's career and wider profession – to the coming of the light in another – mass electrification is the technological advance that enables TV, rock-and-roll, and cinema to come into existence and then obliterate popular appreciation of, and demand for, the traditions of music hall theatre.

It is significant in this regard that the only two characters who display any discernible enthusiasm for Tatischeff's act are both Scottish: Alice and a bibulous Hebridean laird. However, Chomet does not ascribe the attractive credulity of those protagonists to some misty-eyed sense of Celtic ethnic origin. Rather, the director emphasises the more prosaic fact of the physical remoteness of the island community from which Alice and the laird hail: electricity arrives on it only at the same time that Tatischeff does. The gloomy inference is that the rural islanders will in the long term prove no less resistant to the gaudy distractions of the electric age than the screaming London teenyboppers who viewers earlier see mobbing a fictitious local beat group, Billy Boy and the Britoons, during Tatischeff's unsuccessful engagement in the British capital. In this sense, while *The Illusionist* calculatedly exploits elements of the *Brigadoon* (1954) myth of rural Scotland as an oasis within the wider cultural desert of the modern world, it cannot be said that the film straightforwardly endorses that stereotype. The uneven development and dissemination of technology, rather than any meaningful differences in cultural sensibility, is what distinguishes the movie's unspoilt Scottish settings from their metropolitan French and English counterparts.

Yet while *The Illusionist* is clearly aware of the dangers attendant upon acts of cultural stereotyping in one sense, it could be argued that the movie falls prey to these in another. Regardless of the degree to which one might sympathise with the aesthetic preferences and cultural allegiances manifest within Chomet's reading of recent popular cultural history, it ought also to be noted that

the terms in which his movie critiques modern urban popular cultures and ways of living – as fundamentally inauthentic, emasculating, and feminised to the point of mass hysteria – take their place within a long and ideologically questionable tradition within European thought and artistic practice. The exaggeratedly effeminate offstage gait of the Britoons suggests the idea of cynical male homosexuals purveying ridiculous romantic scenarios to credulous heterosexual girls. Alice's insatiable demands for high-end fashion that Tatischeff cannot afford imply the idea of mass consumerism as an intrinsically feminine malaise. So, too, does the final indignity to which the aging magician submits. With no other means of supporting Alice, Tatischeff briefly accepts a degrading job publicising the annual sales at Jenners, the iconic department store located on Edinburgh's famous Princes Street. Dressed, tellingly enough, in a shocking pink outfit, he is forced to perform in a glass cage formed by the storefront windows, magically producing the time-worn accoutrements of feminine glamour – handbags, brassieres – from up his sleeves, in an attempt to attract the attention of (mostly female) shoppers passing by outside.

Even the one ostensibly happy element of *The Illusionist's* narrative resolution – Alice's induction into adult sexuality when she meets and then begins a relationship with a handsome young local man – seems troubling when viewed through the prism of the film's lop-sided gender politics. Rather than achieving personal independence from one father figure (Tatischeff), it seems that an essentially helpless ingénue merely passes into the waiting hands of a more virile successor. Like the magician, Alice's boyfriend also seems immune to the feminised seductions of modern consumer culture: if the older man is dedicated to fostering the life of the imagination, the younger man diligently pursues that of the mind. Alice first sees her lover-to-be reading intently while sitting at the window of a public library, and he later waits for her outside the door of the same building as she collects her belongings from Tatischeff's lodgings for the final time. If we were to figure Sylvain Chomet as the titular illusionist of his undeniably beautiful movie, then the expertly executed mirage with which he tantalises his viewers is that of a nostalgically genteel social-cum-sexual Scottish Neverland in which it is a man's job to protect and a woman's to be protected.

Jonathan Murray

Reference: Fiachra Gibbons, 'North Berwick is like the Caribbean', in *The Guardian* (11/6/10), pg. 5.